

Sun rises in Trumbull

Written by Donald Eng
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The stars came out for the Sun's official opening as the detergent giant opened its new research facility at 30 Trefoil Drive.

Sun Products, which produces various laundry and dish cleaning brands like Snuggle, Wisk, Sun, all and Surf, dedicated its 46,000-square-foot facility Jan. 22.

The event included guided tours and visits from Lt. Gov. Michael Fedele, U.S. Rep. Jim Himes and state Community and Economic Development Commissioner Joan McDonald.

"What we do here is simple: We research and develop products that can help make people's lives a little better," said Neil DeFeo, Sun Products CEO.

Himes said it was a point of pride to him that a local business was creating world-beating products.

"A company that draws on the talents of residents from Trumbull and the surrounding communities to create

innovative products is as good as it gets," he said. "Partnership between the private and public sectors to create jobs is all of our highest priority."

Craig Slavtcheff, senior vice president of research and development, said the facility currently has about 70 employees, but has been designed to eventually accommodate as many as 120.

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The new research facility already has begun to pay dividends, he said. In the weeks since the company opened the new building's doors, it has applied for 10 patents on research done there.

"That's the pace of innovation today," Slavtcheff said.



Following a brief opening ceremony, Slavtcheff led dozens of guests on a tour of the building, pointing out various features. For example, the hallways in the packaging development section include round portholes, with photos of the company's products inside.

"This makes visitors feel like they are inside a giant industrial washing machine," Slavtcheff said. "It demonstrates a single-minded dedication to our product line."

Another advantage of the portholes is that Sun manufactures private label products for other companies, which are marketed under store brands. When representatives of the private companies visit, Sun can make sure their product line is visible.

Inside the package development area, Slavtcheff showed the guests how plastic pellets can be molded into a computer-designed shape. The computer design has cut down the package development time from over 10 weeks to less than 24 hours. Once the package is complete, samples can be shipped across the country for consumer focus groups to provide feedback.

"For example, consumers like purchasing products in a larger size because it is more convenient and economical," he said. "But eventually, the bottle got tall enough that, ergonomically, people struggled to pour the laundry liquid. That led to what we call the stubby."

The stubby bottle, shorter and wider and holding the same amount of detergent as its taller cousins, also was a boon to a private brand. Supermarket chain Kroger needed a high-capacity bottle that would fit into the 10.5 inch space between the shelves. The stubby fit the bill, and the shelves.

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Also included on the tour was the company's stain lab, where trained stain applicators use real household products to create stains on white linens that other employees then attempt to clean. White-coated workers carefully dabbed ketchup and grape jam onto clean sheets while Slavtcheff led the group to the washing area.

Gesturing to the array of plain, consumer-grade washing machines, Slavtcheff pointed out that the company also had the ability to adjust for another variable — water.

"We can replicate the pH and mineral content to match the water conditions in any region of the U.S. and Canada," he said.

But all of that technology is meaningless if consumers don't like the product, DeFeo said.

"We can never forget that we exist at the will of the consumer," he said.

One potential consumer, First Selectman Tim Herbst, said Sun Products could come in handy in a few weeks.

"I'm glad to hear they can get out tomato stains," he said. "I have to present my first budget."